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Conservatism is good for you: Cultural conservatism protects self-esteem in older adults

### Abstract

The present research explores whether adhering to cultural conservative beliefs elevates self-esteem in older people. In a sample of 311 retired persons it was found that conservatism was positively related to self-esteem, and that this relationship was especially strong in the oldest age group. Statistical control for narcissism did not undermine this moderation effect between age and conservatism on self-esteem. In the discussion, we argue that conservatism among older people seems to go together with a focus on putting personal history in social-cultural context.

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## 1. Introduction

An assumption common to lay persons is that older people tend to be more conservative (e.g., Glenn, 1974), with each new generation becoming less tolerant as it grows older. Many studies have indeed shown a shift towards increased conservatism and right-wing political preferences in older age (e.g., Cornelis, Van Hiel, Roets, & Kossowska, 2009; Truett, 1993; Wilson, 1973). More specifically, older people show higher levels of cultural conservatism, exhibiting increased resistance to change, which encompasses the endorsement of traditional values, social rules and norms, as opposed to the freedom to arrange one's individual life as one sees fit.

The positive relationship between age and conservative beliefs, having an effect size in the range of .25 - .35 (see, Cornelis et al., 2009), inevitably leads to the question what benefits conservatism may deliver to the older individual. Unfortunately, we are not well-equipped to answer the question what makes conservatism so appealing for older people. Most studies on right-wing beliefs tend to focus on negative outcomes, like deficient cognitive style and threat proneness (see, Jost et al., 2003), and these studies thus do not seem to be particularly informative to answer the question what can be gained from right-wing beliefs. Moreover, despite the observation that older people are more conservative, not many studies on right-wing beliefs have focused on samples of the elderly.

One of the few studies including a sample of older individuals was conducted by Van Hiel and De Clercq (2009). They reported that authoritarianism is a buffering factor for stress, and particularly that increased levels of authoritarianism (as opposed to those showing lower levels of authoritarianism) curb the impact of negative life-events on health outcomes. One of the explanations offered by these authors for this beneficial effect of authoritarianism was

based on Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997).

According to this theory, people cope with the anxiety engendered by the awareness of their own death by adhering to the dominant views in a given society, that is, by adopting and fulfilling the norms and values of one's culture. In sum, adherence to one's culture - as may be reflected by right-wing beliefs - thus provides meaning, organization and continuity to life, which might enable people to cope not only with one's own death, but also with negative life-events (Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009).

Importantly for the present study, TMT also stresses the role of self-esteem in coping with one's own death, either as a buffer for this anxiety, or as a coping mechanism. Hence, according to TMT, then, compliance with cultural values enhances one's self-esteem. These observations align well with the idea that self-esteem is construed within a social context. Leary (1999) proposes that self-esteem is a marker of the extent to which an individual's qualities integrate him/her into society. Also TMT suggests that individuals must feel that they are significant contributors to their culture, and that they derive their sense of self-esteem according to whether or not they meet culturally determined standards (Greenberg et al., 1997).

In the present study, we investigate whether high levels of conservatism protect self-esteem, especially among older individuals who are utterly confronted with the possibility of negative life events and ultimately their own death. Indeed according to TMT, both variables are successful coping mechanisms and should thus tend to co-occur. Moreover, in the light of decreasing abilities and resources with higher ages, it may become increasingly difficult to personally enact behaviors of which self-esteem can be derived, and it might be more feasible to derive self-esteem from the cultural-collective level. As a result, especially in the oldest age groups, conservatism and self-esteem should become increasingly entwined.

### *The present study*

In the present Study we investigate whether age and conservatism show an interaction effect on self-esteem. A sample of elderly subjects (> 60 years) was collected. Because our explicit aim was to establish this interaction effect on ‘healthy self-esteem’, we also included a measure of pathological narcissism (Livesley, 1990) to control for this type of self-centered, inflated self-assessment, which we refer to as ‘unhealthy self-esteem’ (Zeigler-Hill, 2006).

## 2. Method

The sample was recruited in Belgium by two research students who contacted their grandparents’ social network, using a snowball procedure. Another part of the sample was collected by a nurse of the yellow-white cross, an organization that provides ambulant health-care, visiting people at their homes. Participants had to be 60 years or older and they had to be retired. The questionnaires were given individually, and the research students visited the participants two weeks later to help when assistance was needed and to collect the questionnaires. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, 331 (response rate = 83%) of which were returned. The accompanying letter for the participants introduced the study as an investigation of “attitudes and beliefs of retired people.”

The sample consisted of 123 males and 208 females. The mean age was 71.7 years ( $SD = 7.3$ , ranging between 60 and 97 years). Of these participants, 9 completed university, 30 completed college, 83 completed high school, 90 completed middle school education, and 113 completed only elementary education. With respect to their marital status, 196 were married, 20 were divorced, 19 were single, and 95 had lost their husband or wife.

## Measures

All items were administered on five-point Likert scales anchored by *certainly disagree* (1) and *certainly agree* (5)

*Cultural Conservatism.* We administered a 12-item cultural conservatism scale (De Witte, 1990) which addresses beliefs and values about education, work, ethic, the position

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of women in society, abortion, and euthanasia ( $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .76$ ). This scale has been successfully used in studies conducted in Flanders (e.g., Van Hiel, Cornelis, Roets, & De Clercq, 2007). A sample item of this scale is: “Working hard makes you a better person.”

*Self-Esteem.* Participants also completed a 16-item measure of self-esteem (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). Half the items measured self-liking (e.g., “I feel good about who I am.”), and half measured self-competence (e.g., “I have proven to perform very well at a number of things.”). The self-liking and self-competence scales were strongly related,  $r = .57$ ,  $p < .001$ , and therefore combined into one aggregate measure (Cronbach  $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = .57$ ).

*Narcissism.* The 16-item DAPP\_BQ Narcissism scale (Livesley, 1990, translated by van Kampen, 2002) showed satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach  $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = .73$ ). A sample item is “I am destined for greatness.”

### 3. Results

Preliminary analyses revealed that sex, education, and marital status did not have a significant effect on self-esteem,  $F_s < 2.50$ ,  $p_s > .11$ . Table 1 reports the correlations among the study’s variables. As can be inferred from this Table, we obtained a significant relationship between age and cultural conservatism, even though the sample consisted of only retired individuals, constraining the variability in age.

*Insert Table 1 about here*

#### *Moderation effect of age and conservatism on self-esteem*

Hierarchical moderating regression analyses of the centered scores of the predictor variables and their cross-product (see, Aiken & West, 1991) accounted for 5.9% of the variance in self-esteem. The main effect of conservatism,  $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the moderation effect,  $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ , were significant, while the effect of age was weaker,  $\beta = -.09$ ,  $p > .13$ . Figure 1 shows the moderation effect between age and conservatism. Simple slope tests (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that the relationship between age and self-esteem was non-significant among

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high scorers on conservatism (one SD above the mean),  $\beta = .05, p > .55$ , whereas age and self-esteem were negatively related for those with low conservatism (one SD below the mean),  $\beta = -.22, p < .001$ . These results thus substantiate our main hypothesis that conservatism buffers the negative effect of age on self-esteem.

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

#### *Moderation effect of age and conservatism on narcissism*

Next, we conducted a similar hierarchical regression analysis with narcissism as the dependent variable, which accounted for 13.1% of the variance. This analysis revealed a positive effect of conservatism,  $\beta = .38, p < .001$ , whereas the main effect of age,  $\beta = -.06, p > .27$ , and the moderation effect,  $\beta = .01, p > .97$ , were non-significant.

#### *Does narcissism undermine the moderation effect of age and conservatism on self-esteem?*

Finally, we repeated the hierarchical regression analysis with self-esteem as the dependent variable, controlling for narcissism by adding it in the first step of the regression analysis. Narcissism did not have a significant effect,  $\beta = .04, p > .47$ , while the moderation effect between age and conservatism remained intact,  $\beta = .14, p < .05$ .

#### 4. Discussion

The present study focused on the benefits of right-wing beliefs in the context of ageing. Our result that conservative beliefs go together with the protection of self-esteem, especially among older people, adds to the emerging literature that these beliefs might offer definite advantages to the old individual. Indeed, Van Hiel and De Clercq (2009) have demonstrated in a sample of retired persons that authoritarianism acts as a buffer against stressing life events. The main conclusion, then, is that right-wing beliefs are good for old people, because these beliefs buffer the negative effect of age on self-esteem (present results), and alleviate the effect of negative life events on health (Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009).

Whereas conservatism shows a positive relationship with healthy self-esteem particularly in the oldest age group, it shows a positive relationship with narcissism, or unhealthy self-esteem, irrespective of age category. The present results thus clarify that conservatism is associated with unhealthy self-esteem among the ‘younger’ elderly, but with both healthy and unhealthy self-esteem among the oldest. Importantly, the present results also revealed that conservatism predicts healthy self-esteem above and beyond narcissism among the oldest.

In the remainder of the discussion, we elaborate upon two issues. First, we argue that conservatism among older people could be understood as a means of putting personal history into social-cultural context. Second, we focus on the negative consequences of adhering to one’s own culture.

#### *Personal past, cultural legacy*

The older individual tends to be focused on the integration of personal experiences and memories as well as the acceptance of one’s own life (Erikson, 1982; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). In reconciling the elements of one’s previous life experiences and the gradual maturation through life cycles, the older individual places him/herself in the array of generations. Hence, because of this focus on what can be contributed from the old to the younger generations, older people are likely to draw more and more upon their personal experiences and history rather than to focus extensively on the limited numbers of new events, knowledge or sensations they might encounter.

This increased attention to straighten out one’s personal past, however, does not preclude or oppose reflection about society at large. On the contrary, this personal past is rooted in cultural traditions that were the context of the formative stages of identity development. According to Erikson (1982), the ego-integrated individual ... “ knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of



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history” (p. 104). Erikson also asserted that “Although aware of the relativity of all the various life styles ... the possessor of integrity ... is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style” (p. 104). In other words, ego-integrated individuals have a strong sense of being part of a given culture and tradition that is rooted in the past and should be preserved in the future.. Hence, adherence to culture and traditions might be considered a means of granting significance to oneself as a person.

Taking this argument a bit further, it is clear that one cannot find the ultimate sense of life in and for oneself. If one is the comparison standard for oneself, the ultimate consequence is that death is nullification, because there remains nothing to be compared with. In other words, one cannot have a meaningful life without others, and culture represents an even broader perspective, or put alternatively, a generalized other. In sum, the evaluation of one’s personal past only makes sense in the social-cultural context in which a life has been lived, and a positive inclination toward this context makes it easier to grant significance to one’s life and to positively evaluate oneself.

### *The downside of adhering to one’s culture*

The last mentioned citation of Erikson’s (1982) work brings us to an important downside of adhering to one’s own culture: People favoring their own group tend to derogate outgroups and to reject everyone who threatens their worldview. In the context of ageing, it has indeed been reported (e.g., Cornelis & Van Hiel, in preparation) that older people exhibit higher levels of prejudiced attitudes. Van Hiel and De Clercq (2009) also raised the possibility that because right-wing beliefs sustain prejudice, it might be considered a form of stress release which channels negative emotions to others, and ‘scapegoating’ might thus increase personal well-being at the expense of other people.

### *Study’s limitations*

The attentive reader might argue that we have taken an unwarranted leap from reporting associations to inferring longitudinal explanations in terms of life-cycle or aging effects. It could be argued that the present age findings merely reflect age cohort effects, and that each generation mirrors today the ideological climate in which it grew up. Strictly spoken, one would need longitudinal data to refute such an alternative explanation of the results. However, we believe that an interpretation in terms of aging effects is defensible. Indeed, cohort explanations proclaiming high degrees of stability in political attitudes after adolescence seem to be at odds with contemporary insights from developmental psychology, showing that attitude flexibility persists throughout the lifespan (Levenson, 2000). Moreover, based on the finding that similar relationships between age and conservatism are obtained in countries with another political-economic history like in former communist countries, also speaks for generational effects (see Cornelis et al., 2009).

Another limitation is that our study's main hypothesis is grounded in TMT, whereas presently unstudied variables might also explain beneficial effects of right-wing attitudes among the elderly. Future studies may pay attention to processes like stress relieve and scapegoating, as suggested by Van Hiel and De Clercq (2009).

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Table 1

*Correlations among the Study's variables*

	2	3	4
(1) Age	.37***	.01	.09
(2) Conservatism		.19***	.36***
(3) Self-esteem			.10
(4) Narcissism			-

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Figure Caption

*Figure 1. Moderation effect of age and cultural conservatism on self-esteem*

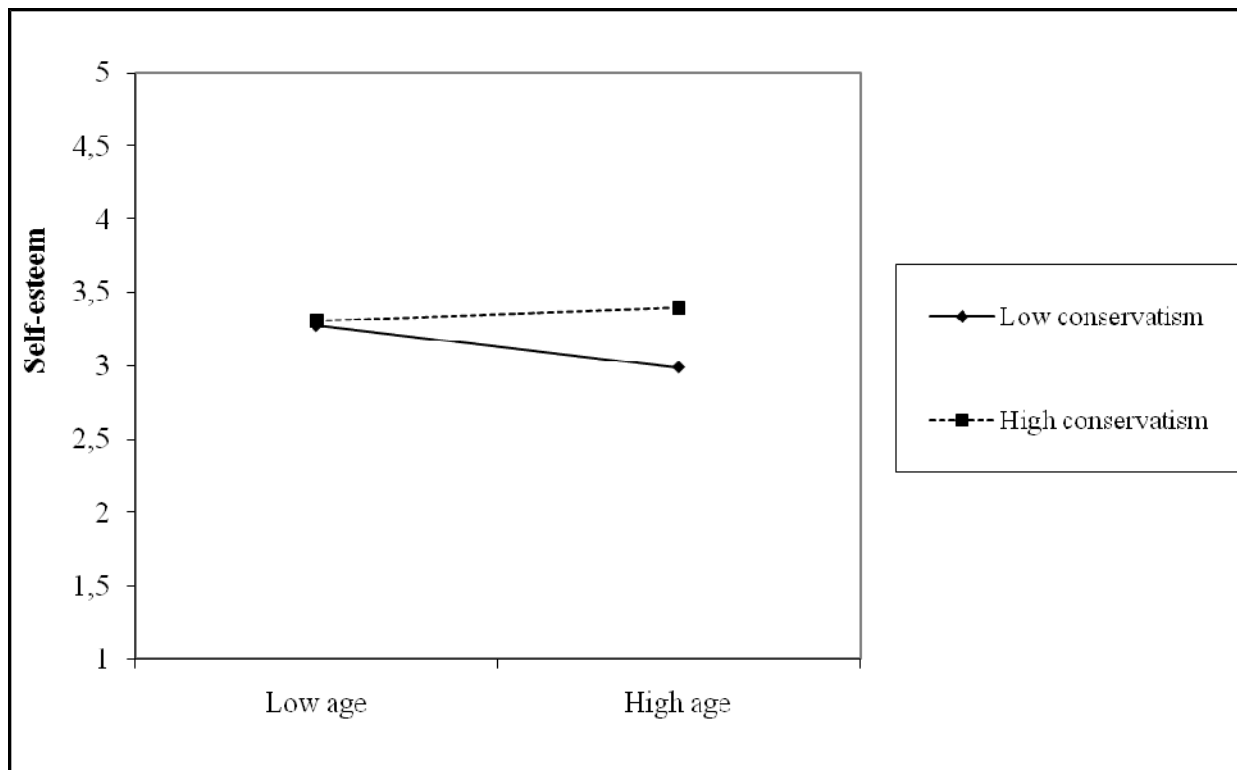


Figure 1.